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Pascal Bruckner's fiery polemic has kindled an international debate. By now Ian Buruma, Timothy Garton Ash, Necla Kelek and Paul Cliteur have all stepped into the ring. Read their contributions [here](#).

24/01/2007

Enlightenment fundamentalism or racism of the anti-racists?

Pascal Bruckner defends Ayaan Hirsi Ali against Ian Buruma and Timothy Garton Ash, condemning their idea of multiculturalism for chaining people to their roots

"What to say to a man who tells you he prefers to obey God than to obey men, and who is consequently sure of entering the gates of Heaven by slitting your throat?" - Voltaire

"Colonisation and slavery have created a sentiment of culpability in the West that leads people to adulate foreign traditions. This is a lazy, even racist attitude." – Ayaan Hirsi Ali

There's no denying that the enemies of freedom come from free societies, from a slice of the enlightened elite who deny the benefits of democratic rights to the rest of humanity, and more specifically to their compatriots, if they're unfortunate enough to belong to another religion or ethnic group. To be convinced of this one need only glance through two recent texts: "Murder in Amsterdam" by the British-Dutch [author Ian Buruma](#) on the murder of Theo Van Gogh (1) and the review of this book by English journalist and [academic Timothy Garton Ash](#) in the **New York Review of Books** (2). Buruma's reportage, executed in the Anglo-Saxon style, is fascinating in that it gives voice to all of the protagonists of the drama, the murderer as well as his victim, with apparent impartiality. The author, nevertheless, cannot hide his annoyance at the former Dutch [member of parliament](#) of Somali origin, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a friend of Van Gogh's and also the subject of death threats. Buruma is embarrassed by her critique of the Koran.



Ayaan Hirsi Ali. © Bettina Flitner

Garton Ash is even harder on her. For him, the apostle of multiculturalism, Hirsi Ali's attitude is both irresponsible and counter-productive. His verdict is implacable: "**Ayaan Hirsi Ali** is now a brave, outspoken, slightly simplistic Enlightenment

fundamentalist." (3). He backs up his argument with the fact that this outspoken young woman belonged in her youth to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. For Garton Ash, she has merely exchanged one credo for another, fanaticism for the prophet for that of reason.

This argument of equivalence is not new. It was used throughout the 19th century by the Catholic Church to block reforms, and more recently in France at the time of the "Islamic Headscarf Affair" by those opposed to the law. In the case of Hirsi Ali, herself subject to female circumcision and forced marriage, who escaped Africa to the Netherlands, the accusation is simply false. The difference between her and Muhammad Bouyeri, the killer of Theo Van Gogh, is that she never advocated murder to further her ideas.

"The Koran is the work of man and not of God," she writes. "Consequently we should feel free to interpret and adapt it to modern times, rather than bending over backwards to live as the first believers did in a distant, terrible time." (4) One searches this sentence in vain for the least hint of sectarianism. Hirsi Ali's sole weapons are persuasion, refutation and discourse. Far from the pathology of proselytism, she never transgresses the domain of reason. Her hope of pushing back tyranny and superstition does not seem to result from unsound or unhealthy exaltation. But in the eyes of our genteel professors, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, like the dissenting Muslims Taslima Nasreen, Wafa Sultan, (see her interview on al Jazeera), Irshad Manji, Seyran Ates and Necla Kelek, has committed an unpardonable offence: she has taken democratic principles seriously.

It is well known that in the struggle of the weak against the strong, it is easier to attack the former. Those who resist will always be accused by the cowardly of exciting the hatred of the powerful.

Not without perfidy, Ian Buruma denies Ayaan Hirsi Ali the right to refer to Voltaire. Voltaire, he writes, confronted one of the most powerful institutions of his time, the **Catholic Church**, while Hirsi Ali contents herself with offending "a vulnerable minority in the heart of Europe." (5) However, this statement disregards the fact that Islam has no borders: the Muslim communities of the Old World are backed up by a billion faithful. Crisscrossed by diverse currents, they can either become the advance wing of a fundamentalist offensive or exemplify a type of religiosity more in harmony with reason. Far from being a negligible affair, this is one of the major challenges of the 21st century!

It's not enough that Ayaan Hirsi Ali has to live like a recluse, threatened with having her throat slit by radicals and surrounded by bodyguards. She - like the French philosophy professor Robert Redeker who has also been issued death threats on Islamicist websites - has to endure the ridicule of the high-minded idealists and armchair philosophers. She has even been called a Nazi in the Netherlands. (6) Thus the defenders of liberty are styled as fascists, while the fanatics are portrayed as victims!

This vicious mechanism is well known. Those who revolt against barbarism are themselves accused of being barbarians. In politics as in philosophy, the **equals sign** is always an abdication. If thinking involves weighing one's words to name the world well, drawing comparisons in other words, then levelling distinctions testifies to intellectual bankruptcy. Shouting CRS = SS as in May '68, making Bush = Bin Laden or equating Voltaire to Savonarola is giving cheap satisfaction to questionable approximations. Similarly, the Enlightenment is often depicted as nothing but another religion, as mad and intransigent as the Catholicism of the Inquisition or radical Islam.

After Heidegger, a whole **run of thinkers** from Gadamer to Derrida have contested the claims of the Enlightenment to embody a new age of self-conscious history. On the contrary, they say, all the evils of our epoch were spawned by this philosophical and literary episode: capitalism, colonialism, totalitarianism. For them, criticism of prejudices is nothing but a prejudice itself, proving that humanity is incapable of self-reflection. For them, the chimeras of certain men of letters who were keen to make a clean slate of God and revelation, were responsible for plunging Europe into darkness. In an abominable dialectic, the dawn of reason gave birth to nothing but monsters (Horkheimer, Adorno).

The entire history of the 20th century attests to the fanaticism of modernity. And it's incontestable that the belief in progress has taken on the aspect of a faith, with its high priests from Saint Simon to August Comte, not forgetting Victor Hugo. The hideous secular religions of Nazism and communism, with their deadly rituals and mass massacres, were just as gruesome as the worst theocracies - of which they, at least as far as communism goes, considered themselves the radical negation. More people were killed in opposition to God in the 20th century than in the name of God. No matter that first **Nazism** and then **communism** were defeated by democratic regimes inspired by the Enlightenment, human rights, tolerance and pluralism. Luckily, Romanticism mitigated the abstraction of the Enlightenment and its claims to having created a new man, freed from religious sentiment and things of the flesh.

Today we are heirs to both movements, and understand how to reconcile the particularity of national, linguistic and cultural ties with the universality of the human race. Modernity has been self-critical and suspicious of its own ideals for a long time now, denouncing the sacralisation of an insane reason that was blind to its own zeal. In a word, it acquired a certain wisdom and an understanding of its limits. The Enlightenment, in turn, showed itself capable of reviewing its mistakes. Denouncing the excesses of the Enlightenment in the concepts that it forged means being true to its spirit. These concepts are part and parcel of the contemporary make up, to the point that even religious fanatics make use of them to promote their cause. Whether we like it or not, we are the sons of this controversial century, compelled to damn our fathers in the language they bequeathed to us. And since the Enlightenment triumphed even over its worst enemies, there is no doubt that it will also strike down the Islamist hydra, provided it believes in itself and abstains from condemning the rare reformers of Islam to the darkness of reprobation.

Today we combine **two concepts of liberty**: one has its origins in the 18th century, founded on emancipation from tradition and authority. The other, originating in anti-imperialist anthropology, is based on the equal dignity of cultures which could not be evaluated merely on the basis of our criteria. **Relativism** demands that we see our values simply as the beliefs of the particular tribe we call the West. Multiculturalism is the result of this process. Born in Canada in 1971, its principle aim is to assure the peaceful cohabitation of populations of different ethnic or racial origins on the same territory. In multiculturalism, every human group has a singularity and legitimacy that form the basis of its right to exist, conditioning its interaction with others. The criteria of just and unjust, criminal and barbarian, disappear before the absolute criterion of respect for difference. There is no longer any eternal truth: the belief in this stems from naïve ethnocentrism.

Anyone with a mind to contend timidly that liberty is indivisible, that the life of a human being has the same value everywhere, that amputating a thief's hand or stoning an adulteress is intolerable everywhere, is duly arraigned in the name of the necessary equality of cultures. As a result, we can turn a blind eye to how others live and suffer

once they've been parked in the ghetto of their particularity. Enthusing about their **inviolable differentness** alleviates us from having to worry about their condition. However it is one thing to recognise the convictions and rites of fellow citizens of different origins, and another to give one's blessing to hostile insular communities that throw up ramparts between themselves and the rest of society. How can we bless this difference if it excludes humanity instead of welcoming it? This is the **paradox of multiculturalism**: it accords the same treatment to all communities, but not to the people who form them, denying them the freedom to liberate themselves from their own traditions. Instead: recognition of the group, oppression of the individual. The past is valued over the wills of those who wish to leave custom and the family behind and - for example - love in the manner they see fit.

One tends to forget the outright despotism of minorities who are resistant to assimilation if it isn't accompanied by a status of extraterritoriality and special dispensations. The result is that nations are created within nations, which, for example, feel Muslim before they feel English, Canadian or Dutch. Here identity wins out over nationality. Worse yet: under the guise of respecting specificity, individuals are imprisoned in an ethnic or racial definition, and plunged back into the restrictive mould from which they were supposedly in the process of being freed. Black people, Arabs, Pakistanis and Muslims are imprisoned in their history and assigned, as in the colonial era, to residence in their epidermis, their beliefs.

Thus they are refused what has always been our privilege: passing from one world to another, from **tradition to modernity**, from blind obedience to rational decision making. "I left the world of faith, of genital cutting (7) and marriage for the world of reason and sexual emancipation. After making this voyage I know that one of these two worlds is simply better than the other. Not for its gaudy gadgetry, but for its fundamental values", Ayaan Hirsi Ali wrote in her autobiography (8). The protection of minorities also implies the right of individual members to extract themselves with impunity, through indifference, atheism and mixed marriage, to forget clan and family solidarities and to forge their own destinies, without having to reproduce the pattern bequeathed to them by their parents.

Out of consideration for all the abuses they may have suffered, ethnic, sexual, religious and regional minorities are often set up as small nations, in which the most outrageous patriotism is passed off as nothing more than the expression of legitimate self-esteem. Instead of celebrating freedom as the power to escape determinism, the repetition of the past is being encouraged, reinforcing the power of collective coercion over private individuals. Marginal groups now form a sort of ethos-police, a flag-waving micro-nationalism which certain countries of Europe unfortunately see fit to publicly support. Under the guise of celebrating diversity, veritable ethnic or confessional prisons are established, where one group of citizens is denied the advantages accorded to others.

So it comes as no surprise that Ayaan Hirsi Ali is sanctioned by our intellectuals. Nothing is missing from the portrait of the young woman painted by Timothy Garton Ash, not even an **outmoded machismo**. In his eyes, only the beauty and glamour of the Dutch parliamentarian can explain her media success; not the accuracy of what she says. (9) Garton Ash does not ask whether the fundamentalist theologian Tariq Ramadan, to whom he sings enflamed panegyrics, also owes his fame to his Playboy looks. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, it is true, does elude current stereotypes of political correctness. As a Somali, she proclaims the superiority of Europe over Africa. As a woman, she is neither wife nor mother. As a Muslim, she openly denounces the backwardness of the Koran. So many flouted clichés make her a true rebel, unlike the sham insurgents our societies produce by the dozen.

It is her wilful, short-fused, enthusiastic, impervious side to which Ian Buruma and Timothy Garton Ash object, in the spirit of the inquisitors who saw devil-possessed witches in **every woman too flamboyant** for their tastes. Reading their utterly condescending words, it becomes clear that the war against Muslim fundamentalism will have to be won first on a symbolic level, and by women. Because they represent the pivot of the family and social order. Liberating them, guaranteeing them equal rights in all fields, is the first condition of progress in Arab Muslim societies. Incidentally, each time a Western country has wanted to codify **minority rights**, it is the members of these minorities, mostly women, who have risen up in protest. The generous desire to be accomodating - like that of the Canadian province of Ontario which sought to judge Muslims according to the Sharia, at least for litigations of succession and family - or the proposition of a former German constitutional judge, Jutta Limbach, to create a minority status in the German Basic Law excusing Muslim girls from gym class, is experienced as a regression, a new imprisonment (10).

The mystique of respect for others which is developing in the West is highly dubious. Because etymologically, **respect** means looking on from a distance. Remember that in the 19th century native peoples were seen as so different from us that it was unthinkable that they should adopt the European model, or even French citizenship. Once considered inferiority, the difference is now experienced as an impassable distance. Pushed to the extreme, this eulogy of autarky is at the base of ill-starred political measures. What was apartheid in South Africa if not the respect of singularity pushed to the point that the other no longer has the right to approach me?

So the search for religious equilibrium may frustrate the desire for change in a confession, maintaining the minority status of part of the population, in general women, and condoning a subtle segregation camouflaged as diversity. Unabashed praise for the beauty of all the cultures may hide the same twisted paternalism as that of the **colonialists** of yesteryear. One may counter that since Islam appeared in the 7th century, it will inevitably be somewhat behind or, as Tariq Ramadan maintains, the faithful masses have not matured to the point where they can abandon practices such as stoning (he himself calls for a moratorium on stoning, not a full stop) (11). This flies in the face of "the impatience for liberty" (Michel Foucault) which seizes Muslim elites when faced with the spectacle of secular nations, freed from the fetters of restrictive dogma and retrograde morals.

The Enlightenment belongs to the entire human race, not just to a few privileged individuals in Europe or North America who have taken it upon themselves to kick it to bits like spoiled brats, to prevent others from having a go. Anglo-Saxon multiculturalism is perhaps nothing other than a **legal apartheid**, accompanied - as is so often the case - by the saccharine cajolery of the rich who explain to the poor that money doesn't guarantee happiness. We bear the burdens of liberty, of self-invention, of sexual equality; you have the joys of archaism, of abuse as ancestral custom, of sacred prescriptions, forced marriage, the headscarf and polygamy. The members of these minorities are put under a preservation order, protected from the fanaticism of the Enlightenment and the "calamities" of progress. Those termed "Muslims" (North Africans, Pakistanis, Africans) are prohibited from not believing, or from believing periodically, from not giving a damn about God, from creating a life for themselves far away from the Koran and the rites of the tribe.

Multiculturalism is a racism of the anti-racists: it chains people to their roots. Thus Job Cohen, mayor of Amsterdam and one of the mainstays of the Dutch state, demands that one accept "the conscious discrimination of women by certain groups of orthodox

Muslims" on the basis that we need a "new glue" to "hold society together." In the name of social cohesion, we are invited to give our roaring applause for the intolerance that these groups show for our laws. The coexistence of hermetic little societies is cherished, each of which follows a different norm. If we abandon a collective criterion for discriminating between just and unjust, we sabotage the very idea of national community. A French, British or Dutch citizen will be prosecuted for beating his wife, for example. But should the crime go unpunished if it turns out that the perpetrator is a Sunni or Shiite? Should his faith give him the right to transgress the law of the land? This is the glorification in others of what we have always beaten ourselves up about: outrageous protectionism, cultural narcissism and inveterate ethnocentrism!

This tolerance harbours contempt, because it assumes that certain communities are incapable of modernising. Could it be that the dissidence of British Muslims is not only a function of the retrograde rigorism of their leaders, but also stems from a vague suspicion that all the consideration show to them by the state is little more than a subtle form of disdain, basically telling them that they are just too backward for modern civilisation? Several communes in Italy are planning to reserve certain beaches for Muslim women, so they may bathe unexposed to male eyes. And within a few years the first "Islamic hospital," complying in all points with the prescriptions of the Koran, may open in Rotterdam. Anyone would think we are reliving the days of segregation in the southern United States. Yet this segregation has the full backing of Europe's most prominent progressives! Theirs is a fight on two fronts: minorities must be protected from discrimination (for example by encouraging the teaching of regional languages and cultures and adapting the school calendar to religious holidays); and private individuals must be protected from intimidation by the community in which they live.

Finally, one last argument militates against **Anglo-Saxon multiculturalism**: on the government's own avowal it doesn't work. Not content to have served as an asylum for Jihad for years on end, with the dramatic consequences known to all, the United Kingdom must admit today that its social model based on communitarianism and separatism doesn't work. Many people scoffed at French authoritarianism when parliament voted to forbid women and young girls from wearing headscarves in school and in government offices ([news story](#)). Timothy Garton Ash for his part, who starts his review in Seine Saint-Denis, demonstrates a Francophobia worthy of Washington's Neocons.

Yet now political leaders in Great Britain, the Netherlands and Germany, shocked by the spread of hijab and burqa, are considering passing laws against them (12). The facts speak against the appeasers, who enjoin Europe to fit in with Islam rather than vice versa. For the more we give in to the radicalism of the bearded, the more they will harden their tone. Appeasement politics only increase their appetite. The hope that benevolence alone will disarm the brutes remains for the moment unfounded. We in France also have **our Jihad collaborators**, on the extreme left as on the right: at the time of the Muhammad cartoon affair last year, deputies of the UMP proposed to institute blasphemy laws that would have taken us back to the Ancien Regime.

But modern France was forged in the struggle against the hegemony of the Catholic Church. And two centuries after the Revolution it will not support the yoke of a new fanaticism. That is why attempts by revanchist Islamic tendencies such as the Saudi Wahabites, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafists or Al Qaida to gain ground on European territory and reconquer Andalusia resembles a colonial enterprise that must be opposed (13). How did Europe and France become **secular societies**? Through an unrelenting struggle against the Church, and its hold on the right to regiment people's minds, punish recalcitrants, block reforms and maintain the people - primarily the

poorest - in the stranglehold of resignation and fear. The fight was extraordinarily violent on both sides, but it brought about incontestable progress and eventually led to the law of the separation of Church and state being passed in 1905.

The superiority of the **French model** (copied by the Turkey of Mustafa Kemal) is a result of the victory over obscurantism and events like the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre. How could we tolerate in Islam that which we no longer tolerate in Catholicism? Secularism, which incidentally is written into the Gospels, is based on a few simple principles: freedom of religious affiliation, peaceful coexistence, neutrality of the public space, respect of the social contract, and the common acceptance that religious laws are not above civil ones but reside in the hearts of believers. France, said the philosopher Hannah Arendt, treated its colonies both as brothers and subjects. Happily, the time of colonies is over. But the republican egalitarian ideal postulates that all human beings have the same rights, independently of their race, sex and confession. This ideal is far from being realised. It is even in crisis, as the riots of November 2005 proved. Nevertheless it seems to be a better guiding light than the questionable worship of diversity. Against the right to difference, it is necessary to ceaselessly reaffirm the **right to resemblance**. What unites us is stronger than what divides us.

The positions of Ian Buruma and Timothy Garton Ash fall in with American and British policies (even if the two disapprove of these policies): the failure of George W. Bush and Tony Blair in their wars against terror also result from their focussing on military issues to the detriment of intellectual debate. The diehard sanctimoniousness of these two leaders, their blend of strategic bravado and starry-eyed naivete, prevented them from striking where it was necessary: on the **terrain of dogma**, on the reinterpretation of holy scriptures and religious texts (14). Yesterday the Cold War was caught up in a global combat against communism, where the confrontation of ideas, the cultural struggle in cinema, music and literature played a key role. Today we observe with consternation as the British government and its circle of Muslim "advisers" flirts with the credo: better fundamentalism than terrorism - unable to see that the two go hand in hand, and that given a chance, fundamentalism will forever prevent the Muslims of Europe from engaging in reform.

Yet fostering an **enlightened European Islam** is capital: Europe may become a model, a shining example for reform which will hopefully take place along the lines of Vatican II, opening the way to self-criticism and soul-searching. However we must be sure not to speak to the wrong audience, styling the fundamentalists as friends of tolerance, while in fact they practise dissimulation and use the left or the intelligentsia to make their moves for them, sparing themselves the challenge of secularism (15).

It is time to extend our solidarity to all the rebels of the Islamic world, non-believers, atheist libertines, dissenters, sentinels of liberty, as we supported Eastern European dissidents in former times. Europe should encourage these diverse voices and give them financial, moral and political support. Today there is no cause more sacred, more serious, or more pressing for the harmony of future generations. Yet our continent kneels before God's madmen, muzzling and libelling free thinkers with suicidal heedlessness. Blessed are the sceptics and non-believers if they can calm the murderous ardour of faith!

It is astonishing that 62 years after the fall of the Third Reich and 16 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, an important segment **Europe's intelligentsia** is engaged in slandering the friends of democracy. They maintain it is best to cede and retreat, and pay mere lip-service to the ideals of the Enlightenment. Yet we are a long way off the dramatic circumstances of the 1930s, when the best minds threw themselves into the

arms of Berlin or Moscow in the name of race, class or the Revolution. Today the threat is more diffuse and fragmented. There is nothing that resembles the formidable peril of the Third Reich. Even the government of Mullahs in Tehran is a paper tiger that could be brought to its knees with a minimum dose of rigour. Nevertheless the preachers of panic abound. Kant defined the Enlightenment with the motto: **Sapere aude** - dare to know. A culture of courage is perhaps what is most lacking among today's directors of conscience. They are the symptoms of a fatigued, self-doubting Europe, one that is only too ready to acquiesce at the slightest alarm. Yet their good-willed rhetorical molasses covers a different tune: that of capitulation!

(1) Ian Buruma: "Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo Van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance", New York (Penguin Press) 2006

(2) "Islam in Europe" in: New York Review of Books, October 5, 2006

(3) Buruma too speaks of "Enlightenment fundamentalists", p. 27.

(4) Ayaan Hirsi Ali: "Infidel", Free Press, 2007

(5) Buruma, op. cit., p. 179.

(6) According to Ian Buruma, the well-known Dutch author Geert Mak compares Ayaan Hirsi Ali's film "Submission" with the anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda film "Jud Süß" ("Murder in Amsterdam", page 240).

(7) In France, 30,000 women of African origin have been subject to genital cutting, and another 30,000 women risk cutting in the future. France has long been the only country to prosecute genital cutting, and the law 4/04/06 has reinforced these measures.

(8) Ayaan Hirsi Ali, "Infidel".

(9) Timothy Garton Ash, in "Islam in Europe." For Garton Ash, Ayaan Hirsi Ali "is irresistible copy for journalists, being a tall, strikingly beautiful, exotic, brave, outspoken woman with a remarkable life story, now living under permanent threat of being slaughtered like van Gogh. (...) It's no disrespect to Ms. Ali to suggest that if she had been short, squat, and squinting, her story and views might not be so closely attended to."

(10) Jutta Limbach: "Making multiculturalism work", in: signandsight.com

(11) Ramadan reiterated this position during a debate with Nicolas Sarkozy on November 20, 2003 on French television. His brother, Hani Ramadan, also a Swiss citizen, defends stoning as punishment.

(12) According to various surveys, 87 percent of British Muslims feel primarily Muslim; in France it is 46 percent. So the majority of Muslims stand behind the republican ideal, putting their religious principles behind their loyalty to the French nation.

(13) Remember the communiques of Al Qaida on September 18, 2001: "We shall break the cross. Your only choice is Islam or the sword!" And in September 2006 after the declarations of Benedict XVI in his Ratisbonne speech on violence and religion,

demonstrators in Jerusalem and Naplouse bore signs saying "The conquest of Rome is the solution." And Chiek Youssef Al-Quaradhawi, spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood and mentor of Tariq Ramadan, said in one of his most famous sermons that he was certain that "Islam would return to Europe as a victorious conqueror, after having been twice expelled. I maintain that this time the conquest will not come of the sword, but of preaching and ideology." Al Quaradhawi also condones suicide attacks.

(14) In 2004, Tony Blair printed up two Christmas cards, one of which was addressed to non-Christians and made no reference to the birth of Christ. What paternalism lurks behind this debauchery of good intent!

(15) On Tariq Ramadan's duplicity and deep-seated anti-Semitism: he believes the machinations of the deeply reactionary "Zionist Lobby" are responsible for the bad reputation of his grandfather, Hassan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The very well-researched and convincingly argued book "Frere Tariq" by Caroline Fourest (Paris, Grasset, 2004) is highly recommendable in this context. After it was published, the author was physically threatened on the website of the friends of Ramadan, Ouma.com. Subjected to a witch hunt, she had to be protected by the police for some time.

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*The article originally appeared in German in the online magazine **Perlentaucher** on January 24, 2007.*

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Translation: jab.

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